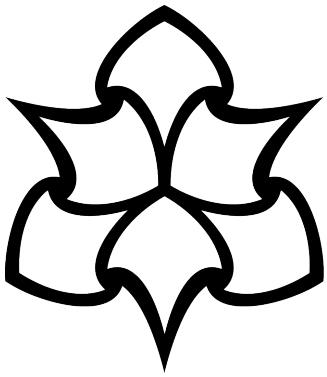

Heaven Sent? The Afterlife, Immortality and Controversy in the Moffat\Capaldi era

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The presence of the afterlife, in a variety of different forms, has been one of the more surprising aspects of the Capaldi/Moffat era of *Doctor Who*. From Series 8's focus on the computerised post-death world of the Nethersphere, to the titles of Series 9's final episodes ('Heaven Sent'/'Hell Bound'), potential afterlives have rippled through Capaldi's tenure as the Doctor. While *Doctor Who* has always raised questions about the nature of death and the possibility (and desirability) of post-mortem survival, this focus on the afterlife has recently proven a source of controversy. This chapter examines questions of the afterlife and death in the Capaldi era as one way of exploring the intersection between religion and media in twenty-first century British television. In dealing with these themes, *Doctor Who* raises questions about the secularisation of British society, the positioning of potentially controversial religious issues within a globalised television brand, and the importance of canonical consistency.

I. 'Wherever it is people go when they die': The Ambiguous Afterlife

Television shows based around death and the afterlife are not a new phenomenon, but the number of dramatic narratives exploring these themes has increased markedly from the turn of the millennium. American shows such as *Dead Like Me* (2003-2004), which featured the recently deceased re-employed as grim reapers, or *Pushing Daisies* (2007-2009), which focused on the central character's ability to restore the dead to life, joined *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), where the living and the dead mingled in and around a funeral parlour.[1] Since 2010, an explosion of post-death content has been produced in the United States. This ranges

from series with significant portions set in part in heaven (e.g. *Dominion* [2014-2015]) or hell (e.g. *Constantine* [2014], *Lucfier* [2015-present]), to those which focused on the return of the dead, either as zombies (e.g. *iZombie* [2015-present], *The Walking Dead* [2010-present]) or as part of mysterious mass revivals (e.g. *The Returned* [2015]).[2] The most popular and long lasting of these shows has been *Supernatural* (2005-present) which has featured repeated visits to heaven and hell in the course of its decade-long run. There have been fewer examples of afterlife-based television produced in Europe. French drama *Les Revenants* [2012-present] served as the basis for *The Returned*, while the BBC's *In the Flesh* (2013-2014) explored the tensions caused by 'recovering' zombies in a Lancashire village.

The popularity of these topics is, to some extent, unsurprising. Art and literature have always imaginatively explored life after death, as the continuing influence of Dante's images of hell testifies.[3] However, the large number of shows dealing with the theme suggest that there is a wider cultural trend at work. In the United States at least, belief in an afterlife remains high. According to the Baylor Religion Survey, 81% of Americans surveyed in 2010 believed in heaven, while 69.6% believed in hell.[4] Recent research has also found that belief in life after death is growing among Australian youth.[5] This contrasts with the British picture, where a 2015 survey found that only 36% thought that an afterlife was likely or probable, compared to 48% who took the opposite view.[6] Other studies complicate this picture in finding even among professed Atheists, confusion over what happens after death, and belief in the possible existence of ghosts or some kind of future state.[7]

Given these figures, the appeal of shows based upon the afterlife becomes more understandable, particularly within an American broadcast context. Although programmes

such as *Supernatural* and *Lucifer* clearly do not present a traditional picture of the hereafter, they nonetheless benefit from the fact that their audiences inhabit a wider Christian plausibility structure. This allows shared cultural cues or concepts of the afterlife to resonate with viewers. At the same time, concepts from popular cultural presentations of the afterlife merge into existing personal worldviews, creating what Christopher Partridge has described as an 'occultural' milieu in which elements from organised religion, alternative spiritualities and popular culture form new plausibility structures. Popular culture portrayals of the afterlife might therefore include ideas drawn primarily from Christianity, merged with concepts from Buddhism, alternative religions, and other popular culture franchises. While such shows are unlikely to form the sole basis for religious belief, they can nonetheless serve to reinforce a wider cultural belief in the afterlife - in turn promoting further popular cultural representations.[8] Elements drawn from media can also help to support an individual's own religious conceptions. These can be conservative, with popular media helping to reinforce belief in life after death.[9] Alternatively, they can work as part of an eclectic individual religious view, in which elements of different media merge with a variety of more traditional and alternative beliefs to form a personal religious bricolage..[10]

Representations of the afterlife present particular problems for *Doctor Who*. Whereas shows such as *Supernatural* can establish post-death worlds as part of their diegesis, *Doctor Who* has more than fifty years' worth of pre-existing mythology to contend with. As David Layton has argued, the show has often celebrated its humanistic roots, and movement away from these can be controversial.[11] To establish an afterlife within *Doctor Who* might imply that the series is disavowing its traditional critique of attempts to transcend death, as well as abandoning a 'humanistic' position. While the consistency of the show's humanism can be questioned,[12] controversy has arisen at points when it appears to adopt a pro-religious

position. The possibility of reading the 2014 episode 'Kill the Moon' as a pro-life allegory, for example, drew criticism from fans which touched on issues of gender, religion, the denigration of science, and the politics of appealing to an American audience.[13]

On the other hand, *Doctor Who*'s humanism is more unstable than Layton argues. Claims that the Doctor represents a 'Christ figure', made by both popular[14] and academic commentators,[15] provide evidence for the possibility of religious readings of the show. While generally inviting humanist interpretations, and occasionally openly criticising religion,[16] in general *Doctor Who* has displayed a degree of ambiguity on religion that allows for both pro- and anti-religious readings. The show's ambiguity on the subject demonstrates its polysemic nature, allowing viewers to find their own beliefs reflected in the text.[17] Even *Torchwood*, which celebrated its opposition to conservative values (including religious belief), was more ambivalent about the afterlife than it first appeared to be. While the opening scenes of its first episode featured a briefly resurrected man's terrified realisation that there was no afterlife, as Jim Clark has argued, the show later suggests some kind of hellish post-death existence.[18]

The vision of 'heaven' presented in Series 8 perfectly illustrates the show's ambiguous treatment of religion. Although the portrayal of the afterlife was arguably the most explicit attack on religious belief since *Doctor Who*'s return in 2005, this critique was inherently unstable. Firstly, criticism was combined with philosophical arguments that could be used to support belief in an afterlife. Secondly, any concerns over the show's presentation of heaven were overtaken by larger controversies that touched both on fans' primary concerns and wider public shibboleths surrounding discussion of death. This allowed for flexibility in interpretation.

Series 8's portrayal of heaven began in 'Deep Breath', when the episode's antagonist revealed his aim was 'to find the promised land'. While the Doctor dismissed this idea out of hand, the final scene found his vanquished foe in a garden, identified by Missy as 'Paradise. Welcome to heaven'. A similar motif was repeated throughout the series, as the appearances of Missy and 'heaven' came together to constitute an ongoing arc. A dead marine was welcomed 'to heaven' in 'Into the Dalek'; robots sought the 'promised land' in 'Robot of Sherwood'. In 'The Caretaker', Missy's assistant Seb informed a deceased police officer that he was now in 'The afterlife. The Promised Land'.

The complete revelation of the nature of this 'heaven' came in the series' penultimate episode, 'Dark Water'. The afterlife was the 'Nethersphere'; a piece of Time Lord technology that allowed minds to be uploaded into a vast database.[19] Missy, a female regeneration of the Master, had collected these minds in order to download them into corpses converted into Cybermen. The concept of an afterlife was a ruse designed to persuade humans to treat their dead with reverence and provide a stock of corpses and minds for the Cybermen. In an offhand comment in the following episode, the Doctor revealed that Missy seeded the concept of heaven in human consciousness in the distant past in order to fulfil her plan. Missy, as befits her character, delighted in the fact that she had deceived humanity: 'The Nethersphere. You know it's ever so funny, the people that live inside that think they've gone to heaven.'

This appeared to be a clear-cut criticism of religious belief, consistent with Layton's emphasis on the humanist nature of the show. 3W, the company controlling the Nethersphere,

were based in St Paul's Cathedral, perhaps symbolically demonstrating that science had superseded religion.[20] This concept of heaven as a tool of social control is a science-fiction intensification of the Marxist critique of religion. Here, even the souls of those who think they have reached heaven become capital, stored for the later benefit of imperialistic and depersonalised overlords. The raising of the dead as Cybermen acts as an (unintentional?) parody of the final resurrection, which occurs towards the end of the Book of Revelation.[21] Humanity's apocalyptic rising 'to glory' here destroys individuality and personal distinctions, adopting the critical viewpoint that equates apocalyptic longing with a desire for a totalitarian erasure of difference.[22]Yetat the same time, the show portrayed the Nethersphere as 'real'. The individuals contained within maintained their personalities and individual identity. They appeared to preserve, to some extent, their external relationships, although there remained a firm line between the worlds of the living and the dead.[23]

This afterlife was also a place of possible redemption. Throughout Series 8, Clara's love interest, Danny Pink, had shown flashes of PTSD from his time as a soldier in Iraq. In the Nethersphere he was able to meet and attempt reconciliation with the child that he accidentally killed. In Christian Haunton's examination of the afterlife in cinema, she notes that the presence of opportunities for change in the afterlife represent the major difference between filmic and religious depictions of the concept.[24] Although it is true that Christianity generally teaches that personal transformation needs to occur prior to death, heaven is usually depicted as a place of reconciliation. As Christopher Deacy has pointed out, popular culture representations often fail to highlight this concept of heaven as a place of restored relationship.[25] The Nethersphere, in emphasising the redemptive potential of the afterlife, paradoxically supports an important Christian image of heaven while seeming to deny it. This

ambiguity contributes to the polysemic nature of the text, providing supports for both humanistic and more conventional religious readings of the episode.[26]

Likewise, the episode also included philosophical supports for the concept of the afterlife. While Danny was initially sceptical of his post-mortem location, Seb provided support for his new ontological status:

> Imagine babies in wombs could talk to other babies in other wombs. What would they say? What would they think life was like if they could talk among themselves?... They'd think that life was nine months long. Then, boom, trap door opens, out you fall, gone for ever. Never hear from those guys again. Nothing at the end of the cord….This isn't really an afterlife. It's just more life than you were expecting.

In this way, the series' arc was able both to provide a critique of the afterlife, and to offer possible support for those who believed. This ambiguity reflects the contrasting survey data examined earlier – while the British public are generally sceptical when asked directly about heaven, a generalised belief in the possibility of the afterlife appears in more in-depth qualitative studies. The show's religious critique was softened by philosophical supports for faith.

It is interesting to compare this presentation of the afterlife with its portrayal in *Doctor Who*'s 2016 spin-off *Class*, which developed a number of key narrative points built upon the concept. The first series' story arc focused upon the question of whether the 'Cabinet of

Souls', a device that housed the Rhodian afterlife, would be weaponised to destroy the race that massacred all but one of that species. The Doctor's presence in the first episode saw a reiteration of the parent series' position on the afterlife; for the Time Lord, the Cabinet was 'just bedtime stories for children to make death less scary'. Yet in reality, the Cabinet contained both the souls of deceased Rhodians, and the potential to weaponise them. *Class* repeatedly emphasised the power of souls and the possibility of an afterlife as both a positive and negative force. The series' penultimate episode 'The Metaphysical Engine' introduced the idea that all possible afterlives exist if there is sufficient belief in them: 'Everything in the universe is conserved. Everything, even belief. Get millions of creatures believing something strongly enough for long enough, and even space responds'.

Class's position on the afterlife reflects the greater willingness to take belief and the existence of supernatural worlds seriously that Laura Feldt has recently argued is a staple of contemporary young adult fantasy.[27] This is perhaps unsurprising given *Class* showrunner Patrick Ness's background in this genre, but demonstrates a major divergence from the denial of the afterlife in *Doctor Who* and the hellish darkness imagined in *Torchwood*. While it may matter little to an individual viewer's enjoyment of either *Doctor Who* or *Class* whether the two series share a position on the possibility of the afterlife, their divergence provides further evidence of the difficulty of maintaining a consistent mythology within larger narrative universes across a franchise.

II. 'If you've had a recent loss…this will be disturbing': Death, Public Service Broadcasting, and the Sacred

As well as offering an ambiguous critique of the afterlife, Series 8's presentation of heaven was also subsumed by other areas of controversy, such as the gendering of Time Lords. The choice of a female Master provided canonical confirmation that Time Lords could change gender at regeneration.[28] Much of the controversy surrounding the episodes within *Doctor Who* fandom focused upon the significance of Missy as a female Master, particularly as it re-opened the possibility of casting a female Doctor.[29] That the episode dealt with one of the longest running controversies in *Doctor Who* fandom acted as a way of drawing fan focus away from the depiction of the afterlife. Where individual fans may have been concerned about the religious implications of the story arc, fan and mainstream press debate could focus instead on the importance of Missy's appearance for the future of the show.

General viewers also focused on another concern. The popular Christian view of heaven has seen it as a place of disembodied existence. The soul separates from the body, which perishes at death and fades away.[30] Theologically this can be problematic, as several parts of the Bible discuss a resurrection of the body prior to the final judgement, and the creation of a new heavens and new earth that suggests embodied experience.[31] Where 'Dark Water' caused controversy was in its suggestion that a connection between the body and mind\soul continued after death. As Seb told Danny, 'you're still connected to your old body in the old world. You're still going to feel what it feels'. This had serious implications for the treatment of the dead. Disembodied voices pleaded with the living not to cremate them, while those who had left their bodies to science were heard screaming in agony as they were dissected.

‘Dark Water’ generated more complaints than any other episode since *Doctor Who*’s revival in 2005.[32] Media reports of the complaints were interesting for the way in which they perceived objections to the content. The *Daily Mail*, for example, suggested in its article header that viewers were upset ‘about *Doctor Who* - a children's show - dealing with [the] afterlife’.[33] This suggested a general religious objection; that the show had strayed into territory that was not only off-limits for popular television, but particularly unsuitable for children. Other publications focused on the implied criticism of cremation as the reason for the offence, especially the possibility that the show might offend the recently bereaved and those who were terminally ill.[34]

Given the BBC’s view of *Doctor Who* as a key ‘reputational asset’, it is unsurprising that they were quick to respond to complaints.[35] Their official response used two strategies. First, they emphasised their commitment to warning viewers of potentially upsetting material. Ofcom requires that ‘clear information about content that may distress some children should be given, if appropriate, to the audience’ on pre-watershed shows.[36] While there was no warning prior to ‘Dark Water’, the BBC’s response insisted that a notice of the disturbing content had nonetheless been broadcast: ‘The scene in which a character reveals 3W's unconventional theory about the afterlife was preceded by the same character warning the Doctor and Clara several times that what they were about to hear could be distressing’.[37] This claim, which transforms a diegetic warning to characters into a public service warning to viewers, provides an example of the way in which a broadcaster’s attempted defence of material can detract from the effectiveness of artistic decisions. In the episode, Dr Chang plays the Doctor and Clara a recording of a voice begging not to be cremated. He repeatedly warns them that ‘If you’ve had a recent loss, this might be… this *will be* disturbing’ and that ‘If you’d rather not hear these words, there’s still time’. Diegetically these warnings make

sense – Clara *has* just experienced the loss of Danny Pink. Yet acting paratextually, the BBC's statement transforms Dr Chang's warning to Clara and the Doctor into a fourth-wall breaking caution to viewers, creating a distancing effect from the narrative.

The BBC's second strategy was to claim subtly that the complainants had misread the episode: 'When the Doctor does hear these claims, he immediately pours scorn on them, dismissing them out of hand as a "con" and a "racket". It transpires that he is correct, and the entire concept is revealed to be a scam perpetrated by Missy'.[38] However, this is not what the episode suggests. While the afterlife itself may be 'a con', the dead really do remain conscious. Danny Pink continues to feel the cold of the freezer where his body is stored, while there is nothing to suggest that the screams of dissection victims or the pain of the cremated is not genuine. The dead may be experiencing these things through a computer simulation, but the feelings nonetheless appear real to them. As Matt Hills has noted, post-transmission broadcaster produced-paratexts can serve to maintain an 'on brand' message.[39] They can also operate as a form of viewer disciplining, reiterating what producers or broadcasters see as the 'correct' reading of the show.[40] In this case, the broadcaster's response was to inform upset viewers that they had misread the text, a position that attempted to overwrite both the complaints, and potentially undermined artistic decisions taken by the production team.

While the fact that British viewers were not specifically concerned about the dismissal of the afterlife on primetime television might suggest a general secularisation of British society, the anger over the treatment of bodies (and the BBC's response) suggests that death and the

treatment of the dead continue to be viewed as a category of the 'sacred'. Although the term is often used as a synonym for 'religion', the 'sacred' need not refer to a distinctly religious category. Following Gordon Lynch, it can instead denote 'what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims over the meaning and conduct of social life'.[41] The sacred is therefore not a singular category. Societies can hold a number of different sacred forms concurrently that exist in hierarchical relationships to one another.[42] The 'Dark Water' controversy touched on two of these: first, the idea that children should be protected from disturbing content about death, and second, that society should not risk offending the recently bereaved, or disrespect the recently deceased, through questioning the morality of cremation.

The reaction to 'Dark Water' therefore reveals something important about the hierarchy of the sacred in contemporary British life. As Lynch notes, breaches of the sacred require some form of response and restitution in order to return to the status quo: in this case,via the BBC's official statement.[43] However, a breach of the sacred can also vividly reveal the hierarchy of values operating at any given moment within society. That concerns over the treatment of the dead and protection of children took precedence over portrayals of the afterlife suggests, on the one hand, the declining importance of religion, as these areas of the 'secular sacred' assumed precedence over the presentation of heaven.[44] On the other hand, they also demonstrate a continued concern with areas of life traditionally addressed by religion: comfort in death, and responsibility for protecting the child. That many see the BBC as having a duty to perform these roles is not necessarily surprising given its place within wider British culture and its public service commitment. Indeed, as viewers fund the BBC through the license fee, any breach of this commitment may generate particular discontent for those who feel some degree of indirect complicity in the broadcaster's actions.[45]

Nonetheless, viewer responses to 'Dark Water' demonstrate the way in which media can begin to take on roles previously associated with organised religion in terms of protecting children and providing comfort in the face of death. It is possible to interpret media adopting these functions as a symptom of what Stig Hjavard has described as the 'mediatisation of religion'. .[46] Yet this is not a simple case of the broadcaster performing religious roles. The controversy over 'Dark Water' emerged during discussions leading up to the renewal of the BBC Charter in 2016; a political context in which questions of the role of the public service broadcaster and the role of high budget popular drama within the BBC's remit led to an atmosphere of heightened scrutiny around its output.[47] The controversy therefore erupted at a point at which discussions of the BBC's societal position were part of a broader political debate. It is therefore important that any apparent 'mediatisation' of religion be read within its wider political and media context, rather than as an example of broadcasters straightforwardly 'replacing' religion.

III. 'She died, Doctor': Death and the Sacred in Series 9

Just as societies and individuals have their own categories of the sacred, so too do popular narratives. Large narrative worlds are based on ideas of internal consistency and the maintenance of certain moral norms.[48] As in the real world, breaches of these categories can constitute a profanation of the sacred. The acceptance of death, and the dangers of prolonging life beyond its natural boundaries, acts as one of these shibboleths in the *Doctor Who* universe. As Courtland Lewis has noted, the show has shown 'an acute awareness of the dangers of living forever'.[49] The horror of the Master's form after he exceeded his

regeneration limit in ‘The Deadly Assassin’, the desperation of the immortal Mawdryn’s quest for death in ‘Mawdryn Undead’ and Borusa’s fate to be forever frozen in stone after seeking immortality in ‘The Five Doctors’, all emphasise the danger of seeking to escape death. The theme continued in the revived series – Professor Lazarus’s attempts to live indefinitely are the work of ‘a vain old man who thought he could defy nature’, while the Doctor’s plan to rewrite history by saving Captain Adelaide Brooke in ‘The Waters of Mars’ is frustrated when she commits suicide in order to preserve the ‘correct’ historical record. Similarly, Captain Jack Harkness’s immortality is portrayed as being both unnatural and a curse – a theme that is explored in more depth in *Torchwood*. As Sarah-Jane Smith concluded in 2006’s ‘School Reunion’: ‘Pain and loss, they define us as much as happiness or love. Whether it's a world, or a relationship, everything has its time. And everything ends’.

For all its controversy, Series 8’s finale emphasised the importance of accepting death as a natural part of life. Danny accepted his death in rejecting the chance to re-join Clara when offered the chance, instead sending the boy that he had shot back to the world of the living. In doing so, he completed his redemptive arc and confirmed his heroic characterisation. In 2014 Christmas Special ‘Last Christmas’, Clara continued to struggle with Danny’s death. Under the influence of carnivorous ‘Dream Crabs’ she inhabited a fantasy world in which Danny survived and their relationship continued. Although this fantasy was comforting, it was also deadly. Clara could only survive if she accepted Danny’s death and moved on. Death, as the dream world Danny reminded her, is natural.

Series 9’s approach to death and the afterlife initially appeared to follow this pattern. For example, the Daleks are revealed to be functionally immortal, a horrific fate as ‘they still age,

poor loves. Over time, the body breaks down, rots, liquefies'. The main examination of immortality in the series came through the character of Ashildr, introduced in 'The Girl Who Died', a young Viking girl whom the Doctor brings back to life through alien technology. Although Clara initially viewed this as an act of mercy, the Doctor immediately doubted the wisdom of his action. Immortality is 'everybody else dying… Just possibly, I have made a terrible mistake. Maybe even a tidal wave'. The following episode, set in seventeenth-century England, provided evidence that the Doctor's fears were justified. Ashildr's unending life was filled with heartbreak, as she watched her lovers and children age and die while she continued to live. She disavowed meaningful relationships due to their impermanence; her self-reliance and isolation demonstrated in renaming herself simply 'Me'. Again, the Doctor reaffirmed the importance of death for meaningful life: 'People like us, we go on too long. We forget what matters…We need the mayflies. See, the mayflies, they know more than we do. They know how beautiful and precious life is because it's fleeting'.

Doctor Who's standard position on death and immortality initially seemed to be reinforced by the lead in to the series finale, 'Face the Raven'. Ashildr's ruthlessness and ambivalence towards the Doctor was demonstrated when she placed human lives at risk in order to deliver him to forces seeking his capture. Her plan backfired after the Quantum Shade she had placed on Rigsy was transferred to Clara, guaranteeing her death. The Shade, a 'kind of spirit' that required a soul for satisfaction, acted as a metonym for death itself. It was inescapable in the end: 'You can pass it on, but you can't cheat it'. The Doctor's uncharacteristic threat to punish Ashildr ('I will rain hell on you for the rest of time') demonstrated his attachment to Clara, but also provided her with the opportunity to reinforce the show's affirmation of the necessity of death. Her final act was to 'Die right. Die like I mean it'; an action that was both an assertion of personal responsibility and a brave acceptance of the inevitability of her fate.

The Doctor's refusal to accept Clara's death was initially unsurprising. His close attachment to his companions and propensity to either transgress the self-imposed limits on his behaviour (e.g. 'Waters of Mars'), or withdraw from the world (e.g. 'The Snowmen'), without them is well established in the post-2005 show. The Doctor's response in 'Heaven Sent' and 'Hell Bent', however, went beyond previous reactions to loss.. Clara's death drove his reaction. Placed in a personal prison of his worst fears which (in another reference to the afterlife) the Doctor suggested might be hell, she served as his inspiration to escape through enduring billions of years of painful death and resurrection.[50] Her loss drove his decision to cheat death by removing a 'time locked' Clara from her time stream the moment before she died. This was a dangerous choice, with the Doctor told that he had 'broken every code you ever lived by' and that his actions threatened to splinter time itself. At several points in the narrative, the show reinforced its standard position on death. Both Clara and Ashildr challenged the Doctor's right to deny them a dignified death and the Doctor accepted that having his memory wiped of Clara was a 'necessary' punishment.

All of this was undermined by the episode's conclusion. Clara would return to Gallifrey to die, but would take 'the long way round', travelling with Ashildr in a stolen TARDIS until she has exhausted the possibilities of life. This not only undermined the series' general position on immortality, but also confused the central narrative theme of Series 9, in which the danger of Clara becoming too like the Doctor was repeatedly emphasised. In her final scenes, Clara literally became a second Doctor – fleeing Gallifrey to travel the universe in a stolen TARDIS with a jammed chameleon circuit.

This compromise, which (indefinitely?) prolonged Clara's life, suggests that the show struggled to steer a middle course between the desire for a happy ending, and maintaining the wider mythos' commitment to condemning immortality. The Doctor's hubris resulted in the removal of his memory of Clara (a symbolic death), while her failure to return to Gallifrey to die avoided repeating the downbeat conclusion of Series 8. 'Dark Water' had drawn criticism for failing to protect young viewers from disturbing material on death. 'Heaven Sent' avoided this in its coda, but in the process undermined the consistency of the show's own position on immortality.

This can be partially understood by the nature of *Doctor Who*'s position in the market. The show's coding as 'family television' presumes that it will contain material that will be broadly suitable for the child audience.[51] This requires a certain minimisation of themes that might be deemed distressing for the child viewer, such as death, violence, and sexual content. While *Doctor Who* is marketed for a family audience in the UK, in the United States and other territories it is generally sold as genre television. The attempt to balance these two positions is apparent in official interviews with the production team. While Moffat told *Variety* that he saw *Doctor Who* 'as a children's show', at the same time he reinforced *Doctor Who*'s genre credentials in giving the interview at an Italian comic convention.[52] Appearances of producers and stars at events such as ComicCon further reinforce the show's status as genre television. Up until 2011, *Torchwood* operated intertextually as a way of dealing with issues considered either too 'mature' or 'dark' to appear in its parent show,[53] a position that has now been appropriated by *Class*.[54] With *Torchwood*'s continued hiatus, and international marketing of *Doctor Who* as a high-concept science fiction series, 'darker' themes surrounding death increasingly came to the fore during the Capaldi era. Clara's survival allowed for the show to meet its remit of producing material suitable for the child

audience, while her death in 'Face the Raven' simultaneously permitted producers to emphasise their use of darker themes. The danger with this approach is that it risks undermining the overall cohesiveness of the textual universe – in other words, profaning the sacred categories of the show's structuring mythology. This is not the same thing as the intra-franchise inconsistency between *Class* and *Doctor Who* discussed above. Rather, it is the undermining of a central position which risks introducing a potentially destabilising inconsistency into the world of the show. Should this modification result in a severe breach of the show's own sacred categories, fan rejection may result.[55] In such cases, official paratexts can then re-narrate the established position of the franchise to emphasise producer consistency. Like the BBC statements on 'Dark Water', they serve as official attempts to heal a breach in the sacred. For example, *Doctor Who Magazine* warned of catastrophic consequences for the universe should Clara not return to Gallifrey to die, while emphasising the show's 'remarkable consistency' on the topic.[56]

Examining the presentation of death and the afterlife in the show allows us to see how potential controversy can be avoided both by story decisions (in the ambiguous presentation of the afterlife) and by post-broadcast paratexts. These responses demonstrate something of the 'sacred' in contemporary British society, as discussions of the fate of the dead are deemed inappropriate for a 'family' television show. However, as Series 9's reluctance to accept Clara's death shows, attempts to provide happy endings can risk undermining the show's own 'sacred' categories. In the end, the confused representations of death and the afterlife in *Doctor Who* and its spin-offs reflects the confusion and uncertainty about these concepts in contemporary societies. Fear of death and attempts to prolong life compete with worries about the potential horrors of living too long; doubts about an afterlife mingle with vague hopes of a future place of reward, rebirth, or chance to atone for failure. In this respect, while

Doctor Who's representation of death and the afterlife may be inconsistent, it nonetheless reflects the confused state of modern western speculation on the hereafter.

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[1] See Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 262-290.
[2] On zombie television, see Stacey Abbott, *Undead Apocalypse: Vampires and Zombies in the 21st Century* (Edinburgh, 2016).
[3] See Nick Havely (ed.), *Dante's Modern Afterlife: Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney* (Basingstoke, 1998).
[4] Association of Religious Data Archives, 'Baylor Religion Survey, Wave III' (2010). Available at http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Search/BRS2011_AN.asp (Accessed December 9 2016).
[5] Andrew Singleton, 'Beyond Heaven? Young People and the Afterlife', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27:3 (2012), pp.453-468.
[6] YouGov, 'Survey on Death', August 2015. Available at https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/zcui1w66ie/Copy%20of%20Opi_InternalResults_150817_Death_R_W_2.pdf (Accessed December 9 2016).
[7] Giselle Vincett and Elizabeth Olson, 'Case Study 3: The Religiosity of Young People' in Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto (eds), *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (Abingdon, 2012), pp. 197-202. See also Alice Sullivan, David Voas and Matt Brown, *The Art of Asking Questions About Religion* (London, 2012), which reveals that 23% of those surveyed who claimed to believe in God rejected belief in the afterlife, while 21% of those who did not believe in God believed in life after death.
[8] Christopher Partridge illustrates the way in which popular culture representations of Christian apocalyptic have combined with alternative religion to create new plausibility structures in which these ideas have merged. See Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West, Vol II: Alternative Spiritualties* (London, 2005), pp. 279-337. For examples of popular culture becoming incorporated into contemporary belief systems and new forms of faith see, Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament* (Brussels, 2005).
[9] James Y. Trammell, 'Watching Movies in the Name of the Lord: Thoughts on Analyzing Christian Film Criticism', *Journal of Media and Religion* 11:3 (2012), pp. 113-126.
[10]Greg Garrett, *Entertaining Judgment: The Afterlife in Popular Imagination* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 1-7; Lynn Scofield Clark *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media and the Supernatural* (Oxford, 2003).
[11] David Layton, *The Humanism of Doctor Who: A Critical Study of Science Fiction and Philosophy* (Jefferson, 2012).
[12] See for example Francis Bridger, 'Review of David Layton, *The Humanism of Doctor Who*', *Implicit Religion* 18:4 (2015), pp. 579-581.
[13] See for example, Greg Daly, 'A Pro-Life *Doctor Who*?', *Aleteia,* 14 October 2014. [http://aleteia.org/2014/10/11/a-pro-life-doctor-who/] (Accessed 27 February 2017). I examine this controversy in more detail as part of a case study on discourses about science and religion within fandoms. See Andrew Crome, 'Religion and the Pathologization of Fandom: Religion, Reason and Controversy in *My Little Pony* Fandom', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27:2 (2015), especially pp. 131-134.
[14] See, for example, small group Bible studies based on *Doctor Who* in Matt Rawle, *The Salvation of Doctor Who: A Small Group Study Connecting Christ and Culture* (Nashville, 2015), or the comments of clergy quoted in Jonathan Wynne-Jones, 'The Church is Ailing-Send for *Dr Who*', *Daily Telegraph* 4 May 2008, Available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/1925338/The-church-is-ailing-send-for-Dr-Who.html (Accessed 22 February 2017).
[15] Dee Amy-Chin, 'Davies, Dawkins, and Deus Ex TARDIS: Who finds God in the Doctor?' in Christopher J. Hanson (ed.), *Ruminations, Peregrinations and Regenerations: A Critical Approach to Doctor Who* (Newcastle, 2010), pp. 22-34; Ruth Deller, 'What the World Needs… is a Doctor' in Courtland Lewis and Paula Smithka (eds), *Doctor Who and Philosophy: Bigger on the Inside* (Chicago, 2011), pp. 239-249.
[16] Examples of direct criticism of religion can be seen, for example, in 'The Face of Evil' (1976) and 'The God Complex' (2011). Religious controversy has also surrounded allegedly Christic portrayals of the Doctor. See,

for example Adam Sherwin, 'Christians Protest *Doctor Who*', *The Times* 21 December 2007. Available at http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/tv-radio/article2441741.ece (Accessed 23 February 2017).
[17] Line Nybro Petersen, 'Renegotiating Religions Imaginations through Transformations of "Banal Religion" in Supernatural', *Transformative Works and Cultures* 4 (2010). Available at http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/142/145 (Accessed 28 February 2017).
[18] Jim Clark, '"The Resurrection Days Are Over": Resurrection from *Doctor Who* to *Torchwood*', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27:1 (2015), pp. 36-37.
[19] In itself an idea drawn from cyberpunk literature. See for example, Iain M. Banks, *Feersum Endjinn* (London, 1994) and *Surface Detail* (London, 2010); Greg Egan, *Permutation City* (London, 1994); Robert Sawyer, *The Terminal Experiment* (London, 1995). *Doctor Who* employs a similar idea in the virtual world depicted in 'Forest of the Dead', although not all inhabitants are aware that they are deceased.
[20] It is possible to make too much of this point. The primary reason for the use of St Paul's Cathedral is to recall intertextually the iconic scene from 'The Invasion' (1968), in which Cybermen march down the steps of the Cathedral.
[21] Revelation 20:11-15. This is a general resurrection of all humanity. A first resurrection of 'the righteous' takes place in Revelation 20:5-6.
[22] Lee Quinby, *Millennial Seduction: A Skeptic Confronts Apocalyptic Culture* (Ithaca and London, 1999); Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Hoarders, Doomsday Preppers and The Culture of Apocalypse* (Basingstoke, 2014), pp.44-59.
[23] Cobb has argued that contemporary afterlife film might suggest that the firm division between the worlds of the living and the dead, established from the Protestant reformation's abolition of purgatory, is being undermined in popular culture (Cobb, *Blackwell Guide*, p.289).
[24] Christine Haunton, 'Filming the Afterlife' in William L.Blizek (ed.), *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film* (London, 2009), p. 259.
[25] Christopher Deacy, *Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film* (Abingdon, 2012), pp. 102-109.
[26] Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Cambridge, 2005), pp.123-152. Sandvoss goes further than polysemy, and posits that the text can become 'neutrosemic' in terms of its openness to interpretation.
[27] Laura Feldt, 'Harry Potter and Contemporary Magic: Fantasy Literature, Popular Culture, and the Representation of Religion', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 31:1 (2016), pp. 101-114.
[28] This had already been confirmed in a throwaway comment in 2011's 'The Doctor's Wife'. However, 'Dark Water' was the first time that a significant recurring character had changed gender.
[29] See, for example, Mail Online, '"A woman will eventually play Doctor Who': Sci-fi show's writer Steven Moffat says a female star will take on the role of the famous timelord', *Daily Mail*, 5 December 2014. Available at http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2862743/A-woman-eventually-play-Doctor-Sci-fi-s-writer-Steven-Moffat-says-female-star-role-famous-timelord.html#ixzz4Seoka6Vr (accessed 12 December 2016).
[30] Deacy, *Screening the Afterlife*, pp. 40-43.
[31] For example, Daniel 12:1-4, 1 Corinthians 15, Revelation 20.
[32] Rob Learne, 'Doctor Who: Dark Water got the most complaints in ten years', *Den of Geek,* 13 Mar 2015. Available at http://www.denofgeek.com/tv/doctor-who/34532/doctor-who-dark-water-got-the-most-complaints-in-10-years (Accessed 9 December 2016).
[33] Alasdair Glennie, 'BBC receives more than 100 complaints about 'disturbing' Doctor Who episode that features people feeling the pain of being CREMATED', *Daily Mail*, 6 November 2014. Available at http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2823307/Dr-episode-Dark-Water-prompts-complaints-BBC-dark-themes-concerning-afterlife-cremation.html (Accessed 9 December 2016).
[34] Matilda Battersby, 'BBC defends Doctor Who episode "Dark Water" following more than 100 complaints', *Independent*, 5 November 2014. Available at http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/bbc-defends-doctor-who-episode-dark-water-after-complaints-9841379.html (Accessed 9 December 2016).
[35] Catherine Johnson, '*Doctor Who* as Programme Brand' in Matt Hills (ed.), *New Dimensions of Doctor Who: Adventures in Time, Space and Television* (London, 2013), pp. 107-109.
[36] Ofcom, *The Ofcom Broadcasting Code* (2013), p. 9.
[37] Battersby, 'BBC defends Doctor Who'.
[38] Battersby, 'BBC defends Doctor Who'.
[39] Matt Hills, *Doctor Who: The Unfolding Event* (Basingstoke, 2015), p. 39.
[40] Paul Booth, *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age* (Iowa City, 2015), pp. 94-99.
[41] Gordon Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach* (Oxford, 2012), p. 29.
[42] Lynch, *Sacred in the Modern World*, pp. 54-86.
[43] Lynch, *Sacred in the Modern World*, pp. 105-108.
[44] Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole and Teemu Taina, *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred: Representation and Change* (Farnham, 2013), pp. 1-13.

[45] See the discussion of viewer responses to the BBC's refusal to air a DEC appeal for Gaza in Lynch, *Sacred in the Modern World*, pp. 107-109.
[46]Stig Hjarvard, 'The Mediatisation of Religion: Theorising Religion, Media and Social Change', *Culture and Religion* 12:2 (2011), pp. 119-135.
[47] Most clearly seen in questions raised about the BBC's dramatic output during the charter review. See Department for Culture, Media and Sports, *BBC Charter Review: Public Consultation* (2015). Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/449830/DCMS_BBC_Consultation_A4__1_.pdf (Accessed 23 December 2016).
[48] Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York and Abingdon, 2012), pp. 43-64.
[49] Courtland Lewis, 'Why Time Lords do not Live Forever' in Andrew Crome and James McGrath (eds), *Time and Relative Dimensions in Faith: Religion and Doctor Who* (London, 2013), p. 1.
[50] The Doctor's prison is perhaps better compared to purgatory than to hell, as he will be released when he has completed a predetermined task (see Garrett, *Entertaining Judgment,* pp. 179-184.) Whereas in similar purgatorial films employing the time-loop structure the protagonist accepts their task (e.g. *Groundhog Day*, *The Edge of Tomorrow*), here the Doctor refuses to co-operate.
[51] Matt Hills, *Triumph of a Time Lord: Regenerating Doctor Who in the Twenty-First Century* (London, 2011), pp. 120-123.
[52] Nick Vivarelli, 'Lucca Comics: "Doctor Who" Showrunner Steven Moffat on why the Reboot is a Global Hit', *Variety*, 31 Oct 2015. Available at http://variety.com/2015/tv/festivals/doctor-who-steven-moffat-lucca-comics-1201631032/ (accessed 28 February 2017).
[53] Collins, '"The Resurrection Days"', p. 34.
[54] In an interview with *Doctor Who* Magazine, Patrick Ness stated that 'you might be surprised at how dark it gets…' (Benjamin Cook, '*Class* Preview', *Doctor Who Magazine* 505 [Dec 2016], p. 17). As *Class* director Ed Bazalgette noted 'we had a license to shoot things that certainly you couldn't expect for a show that goes out to very much a family audience on a Saturday evening' ('The Art of the Director', *Doctor Who Magazine* 505 [Dec 2016], p. 32) .
[55] Rebecca Williams, *Post-Object Fandom: Television, Identity and Self-Narrative* (London, 2015), pp. 103-123.
[56] Steve Lyons, 'Who Wants to Live Forever?', *Doctor Who Magazine* 499 (June 2016), p. 17.